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ABSTRACT

The many paradoxes of the profession of the college president are discussed, with focus on whether the presidency is a profession to which a person should aspire and can prepare. Some people feel the position of presidency should only be filled by people with a love of scholarship and the intellectual life. The expectation, especially at the more prestigious institutions, is that the best candidates will be reluctant to leave their scholarship or the satisfaction of other pursuits for anything as mundane and messy and manipulative as university management. A college or university president is suddenly thrust into a larger than life role and invested with great authority, but nowhere in the world of scholarship does a person learn how to be a public figure (though the position requires the skills of a political leader, corporate executive, and evangelist). Although the president is seemingly the person with the greatest power and authority in the university, he/she loses the power to speak off the record without others assuming that a message is being conveyed. It is a no-win situation when there is a weak president or presidency, but when it happens, the board of trustees moves in from one side and the deans from the other, and neither side really benefits. Once the board and deans become accustomed to the power, it is very hard to change their behavior, even by replacing the weak president. Before accepting the position of presidency, it is necessary to ask some ethical and practical questions and do some soul searching. It is important that a person's style as president be congruent with his/her personality. (SM)

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Paradoxes Of the Presidency

by Daniel H. Perlman

Life is full of paradoxes, to be sure. But the profession of college president is permeated with them. One such paradox is whether the presidency is a profession to which one should aspire and for which one should or can prepare.

Robert Hutchins, president of The University of Chicago at age twenty-nine, who spent more than two decades creating one of the best undergraduate programs in the country and stimulating much pioneering and interdisciplinary research, reflected a not-uncommon conception of the presidency in his belief that the position should be filled only by people with a love of scholarship and the intellectual life.

Aspiring to be a college or university president, he said, automatically identifies one as unfit. In the Hutchins view, the presidency is a calling into which one is reluctantly summoned, for which eagerness to serve is a disqualification, and for which direct preparation is either unseemly or unnecessary.

Although times have changed since Hutchins's day, in some settings they haven't changed all that much, as in the "you can't get there from here if you really want to" paradox. It is still better to be nominated than to apply for a presidency. The expectation, especially at the more prestigious institutions, is that the best candidates will be reluctant to leave their scholarship or the satisfaction of other pursuits for anything as mundane and messy and manipulative as university management.

It also seems paradoxical to me that the threshold preparation for a presidency is the world of scholarship, in which the essential experience is doing research and writing in a library or laboratory, often alone, when, instead, the position requires the skills of a political leader, corporate executive, and evangelist.

For most presidencies, the experience of painstaking, careful scholarship, in which one variable is isolated from others for detailed analysis, is a dysfunctional model. There is too much to do at any moment or in any day, too many people to consult with. The solutions achieved are political and pragmatic rather than theoretically pure.

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Nowhere in the library does one learn what it feels like to be a public figure. Nowhere in the quiet of the laboratory does one learn what it feels like to be attacked or cheered not for what one says or does, but for what one appears to symbolize or for someone else's political gain. Nowhere in the world of scholarship does one learn how to respond to a reporter's rude or intrusive questions. Presidents-to-be might do better to apprentice in a mayor's office and learn their craft in the School of Public Affairs.

As a college or university president, one is suddenly thrust into a larger-than-life role and invested with great authority (albeit greatly reduced privacy). This authority attracts followers, but it also stimulates people who have problems with authority. In becoming a president, one moves from an arena of relatively little emotional charge, to a highly charged environment in which one's every action is subject to interpretation, speculation, resistance, and resentment.

It gives solace to recall that even our best and most popular national presidents had bitter critics and ardent opponents, and that Churchill, having saved England during the War, was voted out of office at war's end. Roger Heyns, a past president of the

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American Council on Education, who as a psychologist understood the emotional dynamics very well, used to speak of assuming a presidency as "raising one's head above the parapet."

To speak in psychodynamic language, at some level the president is seen by students and faculty as a parental figure, irrespective of the age of the president or the age of the faculty or staff member. I was forty-four when I became the president of Suffolk University. Many of our faculty were older, but they wanted my attention and approval nonetheless. This parental role, imposed unconsciously for the most part, helps explain the range of emotions, from adulation to anger, expressed to presidents or to safe presidential surrogates such as assistants to the president.

In fact, a president's power is quite circumscribed at most institutions. Only occasionally does the president's elevated authority translate into the ability to directly implement or initiate some action or alter an outcome. However, the president's authority does regularly provide the opportunity, exercised at faculty meetings, orientations, convocations, banquets, and a host of other ceremonial functions, to raise issues, to champion causes, to express a vision of the future, to retell the story of the past.

Much of how a president is perceived by students and faculty is from what one says at these occasions, since relatively few people meet individually with the president or see the specific results of the president's action on a particular issue. Redundancy of message and repetition of theme is generally desirable to get the message across. People know what the president really cares about because he or she speaks about it over and over again.

There is no end to the list of good causes a president might want to champion. The mail is filled with reports of blue-ribbon national commissions and letters from highly placed colleagues espousing all manner of desirable objectives and requesting help in advancing these causes and objectives with constituents on campus. But, paradoxically, the president who brings a new message to the faculty every week soon confuses those constituents.

Presidential paradox:

That the threshold preparation for a presidency is the world of scholarship . . . when, instead, the position requires the skills of a political leader, corporate executive, and evangelist.

In my judgment, a president can give personal leadership to five or six issues about which one feels strongly. By the ninth or tenth good cause, the audience has forgotten the first three and is no longer listening quite so intently, because it knows that this week's theme or cause will be replaced with a new one next month or next week.

A president is well advised to choose the major themes with which one wants the presidency to be identified and to stick with them, repeatedly emphasizing their importance and coming at them from different directions or in different ways. If a president is lucky, one or two or three of the themes will be institutionalized by the campus.

I offer one caveat: the president who is personally and directly involved in a proposal for major campus change runs a big risk. If the campus rejects the strategy, the president may be swept out along with it. The advice of one experienced administrator I know is, "Always put someone else between you and the problem."

Scholarship and teaching are the arenas in which most presidents have previously gained satisfaction and rewards; it is these things that attracted them to academic life. Yet, the paradox is that curriculum and student life issues are matters that (at larger institutions, at any rate) are most often delegated by the president to others—not for lack of interest but because they *can* be delegated, whereas certain other things, less directly related to academic life, cannot be.

The president embodies and personifies the institution to those outside of it. The president is uniquely able to represent the university to off-campus constituents such as trustees, legislators, business leaders, donors, local and national political leaders, higher education associations, the press, and other groups.

While developing and maintaining relations with the governing board cannot be delegated to anyone else and usually is the president's single most important task, other relationships and meetings can be delegated to a vice president for external affairs or perhaps to an executive assistant. It is a higher priority for the president to represent the institution to its major off-campus constituents than to be personally involved with issues that the deans, the faculty, and the provost see as theirs anyway, except when it comes time to champion these issues with the trustees or the legislature.

Stephen J. Trachtenberg, now the president of George Washington University, humorously observed that in his interview with the faculty prior to his appointment as president of the University of Hartford, he was asked about his views on curriculum, general education, and other academic matters. After his appointment, however, the faculty and the deans stoutly resisted any intrusion into their domain. This is an experience many presidents share.

To be maximally effective off-campus, with donors and with opinion leaders, and thereby to best assist the institution's search for money and good will, the president must have a larger-than-life persona and be seen as its embodiment or its spokesperson.

Typically, this role calls for an effective public relations apparatus providing the institution with heightened visibility and the president with the opportunity to be seen and heard and read in the media and the chance to mingle

in influential circles. The president whose image is thus enhanced will have greater entrée to, and greater success with, sources of affluence and influence to benefit the campus. This publicity is especially necessary when the college itself is less well known and is competing actively with others for public attention and resources.

Sometimes, a president is uncomfortable in the bright spotlight of publicity. Sometimes others on campus (even the public relations staff themselves) are resentful of what appears to be excessive presidential self-aggrandizement and egocentrism; they may even subtly or overtly conspire against giving the president the necessary positive public exposure.

Another complexity of roles is that although we tend to think of people in their primary role—as student, faculty member, alumnus, dean, and so on—in reality, people have multiple roles and may be members of several constituencies. The faculty member may also be an alumnus or have a network of contacts among the alumni leaders. The dean may also be a tennis partner of the board chair, or their spouses may have been classmates. Students may also be active in the community. (One day my secretary buzzed me to say that a reporter from *The Boston Globe* was on the phone. The reporter also happened to be a Suffolk University student and one of the editors of our student newspaper.)

Presidential paradox:

That scholarship and teaching are the arenas in which most presidents have previously gained satisfaction and rewards.... Yet, curriculum and student life issues are matters that are most often delegated by the president.

Trustees or legislators who are alumni typically have a network of contacts in the institution; they may be parents of current or ex-students. This intricate web of relationships unravels or reveals itself more and more the longer one is at an institution. Some of the relationships are quite surprising and bizarre, seldom recorded in the higher education literature in anything like their real complexity.

Clark Kerr, Marian Gade, David Riesman, and others have correctly compared being a university president to being a political leader, especially a big city mayor, but there are paradoxical differences. In addition to not openly running for office, there is the issue of one's leadership team or subordinates. A political leader is expected to bring in a team of top subordinates to supervise and direct the corps of permanent civil service employees. But, in higher education it's much more ambiguous.

Who is the president free to replace? Who is on the permanent civil service? Who probably should be replaced but is too well connected politically? How does the institution balance the right of the faculty to have a say in the selection of its dean with the right of a president to pick or appoint a leadership team? If the president has, or should have, the right to pick a team or some of its members, does the new board chair have the right to pick or appoint a president in his or her image or to his or her liking? What about the newly elected governor or the chancellor of higher education?

It also seems paradoxical to me that a president, who seemingly is the person with the greatest power and authority in the university, loses the power to speak off-the-record or to say something provocative or questioning without others assuming that a message is being conveyed.

I used to like to test out ideas on people, to propose unlikely, even preposterous, strategies. As president, if I asked, "Do you think it might be a good idea if we did thus-and-so?" or "What do you think would be the outcome if we tried this?" the response would either be an effort to implement immediately what was thought to be my request, or grumbling behind my back about "the President's latest crazy idea."

Presidential paradox:

That a president, who seemingly is the person with the greatest power and authority in the university, loses the power to speak off-the-record without others assuming that a message is being conveyed.

Another irony, brought home to newly appointed presidents, is that at the very moment when one is least certain about what's going on, who's who, and what the responsibility or the institution is really all about, one is called upon to provide vision and leadership, to hold forth with clarity and insight, and to resolve the thorny dilemmas unsolved by one's predecessor.

A strong president influences an institution's culture, but may in turn be influenced or molded by the culture. Just as some families develop a "good" sibling and a "bad" sibling, or a harsh parent and a tender parent, it may be that campuses develop people to fill various roles; for example, people who are encouraged or required to act out the ambivalent and contradictory feelings. On some campuses the position of provost turns over continually while the presidential position is stable; on other campuses it's the reverse. Has one of the positions been assigned the task of being the "bad guy" and the other the "good guy"?

How much of a president's role is determined by the person's own personality, and how much by institutional culture and expectations? Nobody wins when there is a weak president or presidency.

As nature abhors a vacuum, so colleges and universities abhor a leadership vacuum. In the presence of a weak president, the Board of Trustees moves in from one side and the deans or the faculty move in from the other.

I contend that neither side really benefits from that situation; both would be better off, and probably happier, with strong presidential leadership. However, once the board has gotten the taste of administration, and once the deans and the faculty have gotten used to dealing directly with trustees, it's very hard to change their behavior.

Even the replacement of a weak president with a stronger leader does not assure improvement or amelioration. Imagine the tension of the trustees and the stress on the new president who tries to wean them away from the interesting details of personnel and curriculum, which they have come to regard as their domain, and onto questions of broad policy and long-range direction.

Both before accepting and during a presidency, one must ask some ethical and practical questions: What kind of president do I want to be? What kind of president will my institution permit me to be? If I am in a situation that has conspired to reward weak presidents, because of an intrusive board or a paranoid faculty, am I willing to compromise the vigor of my leadership and involvement for a longer term in that big office?

Such soul-searching is useful in other areas as well. Presidents know they must confer, extend their political network, maintain their faculty and community contacts, and answer all their mail. These tasks tend to keep presidents in their offices long after others have gone home for the night. A thoughtful president also knows the importance of being in touch with one's feelings and those of one's spouse and children—the importance of satisfying one's psychological and emotional needs and the needs of one's family.

But it is paradoxical, even ironic, it seems to me, that learning to be more sensitive does not give us more hours in the day. We must still read and answer our mail; we must still find the time to have individual talks with people; we must still be on time for the meetings we call and for those to which we are called. Unfortunately, attention to personal matters may let us sleep better at night, but it won't get us to bed any earlier.

The literature about the college and university presidency, for those who are in the positions or are plotting to get one, is considerable. Highest on the list of those worth reading are Clark Kerr and Marian Gade's and David Riesman's. One soon notices, however, that the literature is full of paradoxically conflicting and contradictory recommendations.

Some authors recommend big plans and bold action to capture the energies and imagination of the campus; others recommend incremental steps taken with deference to the campus culture and local traditions. Suggestions that the successful president is aloof, detached from the daily commotion, above the fray, contradict alternative suggestions that the successful president is a colleague who consults widely, is readily accessible, attends to every concern, and carries out the wishes of the majority.

Presidential paradox:

That at the very moment when one is least certain about what's going on, . . . one is called upon to hold forth with clarity and insight, and to resolve the thorny dilemmas unsolved by one's predecessor.

One must remember that much of this literature is written by ex-presidents reflecting back on what worked or didn't work for them, and some of it by professors of higher education who may have studied presidencies without personally having an opportunity to experience the role. What a wise administrator learns from these conflicting prescriptions is that one's style as a president has to be congruent with one's own personality. Usually, but not always, that style must be congruent with the campus culture and with the needs of the institution at that juncture.

Although much is made of the frustrations, tensions, and isolation of a presidency, I found enormous satisfaction as well—in seeing an institution grow and develop, in seeing the various parts work synergistically, in helping people collaborate to realize their ambitions and goals.

As I took visitors around the Suffolk University campus, past the laboratories, through the libraries and the learning center, into the Law Review office and the cooperative education suite, I sometimes had the sense of experiencing an orchestra whose sections were playing independently and where, as president, only I could hear the combined effect. Only I was uniquely able (and uniquely obliged) to describe to the various players and to the orchestra's many audiences the harmony and melody of the symphony.

Success in the presidency can bring rewards of deep satisfaction, as one helps an institution and those in it realize their collective and personal goals. Success can also arouse the antagonisms of those who resent the president "becoming too powerful" or dominant.

One must be wary of generalizations about "the presidency," except the generalization that each academic presidency is a unique experience—a product of the institution's culture at that moment, its mission, its traditions, its needs, and a product of the personality of the president and the personalities of the other key players, especially the board chair. Despite the paradoxes I've described, the profession of academic president has held for me more gratification than frustration, more epiphany than agony. It is a hazardous profession, but a compelling calling. □